**The Meidias Hydria**

The University of Oxford hosts the webpage titled "Classical Art Research Centre and The Beazley Archive". The massive database housed here is a comprehensive catalog which incorporates detailed images and highly descriptive analyses of artwork held in galleries around the world. The analysis of each artwork is extremely precise. "A principal aim has been to make extensive resources widely available; web-based technology offers an ideal means to achieve this." (Classical Art Research Center, 1997 - 2013) An initial query into the database for Hercules' first labor involving the Nemean Lion revealed the overwhelming popularity of the scene. There were 1186 vases available for view, 1064 of those were black figure style. By far the most prolific painter of this scene was Antimenes, from whom there are a total of 108 examples from which to choose. There is also a stark contrast between the number of Nemean Lion images and the relatively miniscule selection of vases portraying the hero at the end of his labors. For instance, the image of Hercules' encounter with the Hesperides was found on only 28 objects in the database. The amphora shape is the most popular, displaying 5 examples. Red figure style is significantly more available than black figure style with 75% of the total number. From these I chose vase #220497, a hydria in the red figure style.

This hydria was produced between 450-400 BC. "The sack of the Acropolis in Athens by the Persians in 480 BC and the subsequent destruction of the Persian fleet by the Athenians traditionally marks the end of the Archaic period and the beginning of the Classical, when Greek art reached its full and powerful maturity." (Carpenter p.8) When this hydria was thrown on the potter's wheel, Pericles' influence was undoubtedly present. Xerxes and the Persian Army had been successfully rebuked generations before. The Delian Treasury had been relocated to Athens. Finely detailed red figure pottery, which had developed around 520 BC, was a popular choice over the more old-fashioned black figure style. In the Classical Age, Greece was flourishing.

The vase is currently in the collection of the British museum. In the online museum catalog at [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\_online](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online4) it is listed as object #E224 with the title, "The Meidias Hydria". This vase entered the museum collection in 1772. It was purchased from Sir William Hamilton. The production date here is slightly more refined, c. 420 BC - 400 BC, than is listed on the University of Oxford site. The images on the hydria have been divided into three sections. Section 1, located at the top of the vase, is described as "The Carrying Off of the Leukippidse". Under this top scene, is a register that has been divided into two sections. On the front is Section 2a, described as "Heracles in the Garden of the Hesperides". On the reverse, labeled 2b, the description is "Athenian Tribal Heroes". Height of this vase is 52.1 centimeters. This vase has several inscriptions which identify its characters. Of particular interest is the Inscription Translation. It is translated succinctly; "Meidias made it."

The first publication listed is "Beazley, J.D., Attische Vasenmaler des rotfigurigen Stils (Tubingen, 1925): 459.1". According to google translate, the article title means "Attic Red-Figure Vase Painter in the Corporate Style". Additional information on Sir John Beazley, Lincoln Professor of Classical Archaeology from 1925 until 1956, and the history of the Beazley Archive is available on the University of Oxford website. "It consisted of photographs, notes, drawings, books and impressions from engraved gems. The photographs of Athenian vases are the largest archive of this class in the world and were the basis of Beazley's life's work." This is only one of a multitude of publications listed, which span from 1925 to 2011. The three predominate languages used in these titles are German, Italian and English. The most recent publication is "Smith, A.C., Polis and Personification in Classical Athenian Art (Leiden, 2011)". The abundance of articles containing references to this vase clearly indicate both its historical and scholastic value.

The shape of vase #220497 is a hydria. Most often these vases were used for carrying and pouring water. There are three applied handles. The two handles on the sides would have been used for carrying and the one at the back of the neck for pouring. The placement of the handles and the shape of the vase benefited both utilitarian use and aesthetic design. The scene identified as Section 1 is bordered at the top by a band which encircles the neck. It shares the bottom band, which is located just below the side handles, with the two scenes below. The scene in Section 1 is concentrated in the front of the vase, directly opposite the pouring handle. The figures do not extend around the back of the vase. They terminate over the side handles and decorative foliage fills what would otherwise be a compositional void. The lower register is identified as Sections 2a and 2b. It is divided thematically, but not by physical barrier, just below each side handle.

The Beazly Archive webpage also offers helpful information in its introduction. "The one place and period where there was more specialized production of finer figure-decorated pottery is Athens in the later 6th and 5th centuries." The term fabric is used to describe the both the physical material of the clay matrix and the changes which are effected in the matrix during the firing process. Cross-sections of clay are viewed under a microscope to determine these minute characteristics. "The 'fine' pottery with figure decoration, especially that made in Athens between about 625 and 300 BC, is of great importance to archaeologists and historians because shapes and styles of decoration can be dated closely, often to within twenty years of manufacture." According to information in the Beazly Archive, the fabric of this vase is Athenian. It was produced and painted with refined skill by Meidias in the late fifth century BC. The fabric appears to be smooth, high quality clay which has been painted with black slip.

The red figure technique is used to great compositional advantage on this vase, whose surface is virtually absorbed by the scenes. The upper section has some indication of depth. The figures here are on uneven ground. The chariots even appear to float above the rest of the scene. The lower register has figures who share a common ground line. It is interesting to note that the subject of Hercules and the Apples of the Hesperides only appears seven times in the older, black figure style. The contrast to the subject of Hercules and the Nemean Lion, with its 1064 black figure examples, is indeed drastic. Perhaps the "specialized production" of Athenian pottery and the red figure style developed along with the subject matter. The evolution of theme suggests movement away from brute strength as an ideal. To gain the apples the hero will have to rely on clever persuasion. He seems far removed from his epic black figure counterpart who struggled with the Nemean Lion. Instead of depicting the brute, the artist shows Hercules as handsome and crafty, using his ample charms to achieve his goal. This is the aspect of the hero that seems to have inspired Meidias' careful red figure rendition.

The vase has standard decorative elements such as banding around the neck and handles. The banded lower register has alternating Greek Key and checkerboard patterns. There is floral and vine motif filling unused background space. Figures are abundant and often identified with inscriptions, making identification of the scenes relatively straightforward. Though all three intricately painted scenes are mentioned on the British Museum webpage, only one of these includes our hero. It is located in the lower register, on the front of the hydria. "Heracles in the Garden of the Hesperides" is identified as Section 2a. Hera's far western garden contained a tree which grew golden apples. The Hesperides were the nymphs of the setting sun. They had been tasked with tending Hera's garden and watching over her apple tree. In this scene they are shown while remiss in their duties.

In the direct center of the register is the tree which grows the precious golden apples. A menacing serpent twines its way to the top of the trunk. The tree has only a few slender branches. On the left a female figure reaches out as if to pick an apple. She is identified by an inscription as Chrysothemis. Behind her are Asterope, (standing) Hygieia, (seated) and Clytios (standing with one foot propped and leaning forward). These three figures are watching Chrysothemis closely. Her sister Asterope even reaches out to stop her, but she is totally unaware of any danger. On the right of the tree, gazing adoringly over her shoulder at Hercules, stands another Hesperide identified as Lipara. In one hand she holds an apple. With the other hand she lifts the garment from her shoulder in a gesture that is mimicked by several other females on the vase. The hero of the scene sits leisurely on the cushion of his lion skin. He is anatomically defined with heavy muscle indicated by fine line detail. He is beardless and youthful. He is leaning on his thick club and exchanging an ardent look with Lipara. Perhaps he is trying to charm the apple from her hand. Moving to the right and glancing back at the scene he is abandoning, Iolias closes the composition on the right side.